

In Harlem, a Woman Rams a Blade Into Dr. King's Chest



At June, 1958, White House conference, civil rights leaders presented proposals to President Eisenhower. Pictured from left are Dr. King; White House administrative

aide E. Frederic Morrow; Gen. Eisenhower; AFL-CIO vice president A. Philip Randolph; Attorney General William Rogers, and Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of NAACP.

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This is the sixth of ten installments from "The Days of Martin Luther King Jr."

By Jim Bishop
CHAPTER VI

White House rejection of his proposal for a conference on civil rights had prompted Martin Luther King Jr., through the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to call for a mass Prayer Pilgrimage in Washington, D.C. Any plans King might have had to lead the demonstration were dashed when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People adroitly assumed sponsorship.

The date had already been agreed upon: May 17, 1957, the third anniversary of the Supreme Court decision abolishing desegregation in schools.

More than 30,000 people — ten per cent of them white — stood between the Lincoln Memorial and the Mall on that day. King sensed that he was on trial before the old leaders of his people, and he had decided to combine an intelligent plea for justice with the repetitive phrase which always had impact in the South.

A. Philip Randolph spoke first. Roy Wilkins was introduced. Then came Congressman Adam Powell and two massed choruses which intoned hymns. Mahalia Jackson sang. There were short addresses by the black spokesmen. King feared that the people would be tired of listening, before he was introduced.

Not so. They were waiting for the newcomer. Dr. King, enunciating each word slowly, sent them rolling down over the crowd:

"Give us the ballot, and we will no longer plead — we will write the proper laws on the books." The crowd screamed "Amen!" "Give us the ballot, and we will fill the legislatures with men of goodwill." The crowd shouted in unison, "Give us the ballot!" King went on in his extraordinary voice: "Give us the ballot, and we will get the people judges who love mercy. Give us the ballot, and we will quietly, lawfully implement the May 17, 1954, decision of the Supreme Court." The crowd stood.

He was, by any test, the

man of the hour. The people yelled, cheered, and begged him to go on. Truly, he was now a national figure. Truly, he was a new leader — a Christian following the bare feet of Jesus and Gandhi.

As school opened late that summer, the South remained peaceful. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference realized that it was fighting the acquiescent black as much as it was fighting the arrogant white.

Dr. King arranged for twenty-one mass meetings in twenty-one Southern cities on the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, Feb. 12, 1958. The SCLC did not warm to "Give us the ballot now," because it would require a decade of registration before the black vote would be able to tip the balance in Southern elections. The ministerial alliance was in favor of something with more immediate and dramatic results.

It was time for King to have a White House conference — his public "demands" irritated President Eisenhower because they left the press and the blacks with the impression that until now, the White House

had not listened to or tried to ameliorate race conflict. The Rev. Dr. King received his first invitation in June, 1958.

The conference was held in the big Oval Office. The President extended his hand and grinned. So did Dr. King. Neither felt comfortable.

King, Roy Wilkins, and Lester B. Granger of the Urban League listened while A. Philip Randolph read a nine-point proposal for a more active government role in promoting Southern intergration.

The proposals were reasonable and lawful. When Randolph concluded reading them, the President unclasped his hands, shook his head sadly, and said: "There are so many problems — Lebanon, Algeria..." The black leaders knew at once that either the President did not comprehend the nine points or, more likely, did not want to honor them. They left crestfallen.

That summer Montgomery

was hot, and silent. One more year was dragging toward autumn with no mission in sight.

But summer was not over. On Aug. 29, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy was attacked in his church office by an irate black, Edward Davis, who accused the reverend of having "unnatural" sexual acts.

Abernathy pressed charges, even though he must have realized that, regardless of the verdict, it would be HIS reputation that would be damaged.

The first hearing in the matter was held in recorder's court. The Kings and the Abernathys arrived together. A police guard held King and his wife outside the door. Dr. King said he had a right, as a citizen, to be admitted.

The guard smiled. "Boy," he drawled, "if you don't get the hell out of here, you'll need a lawyer."

Another guard, standing behind the Kings, said, "Boy, you done it now—let's go." Coretta King was stunned as both men grabbed her husband, forcing his head down.

At police headquarters the two policemen shoved King past the desk, saying, "Book him for loitering," and took him to a cell full of blacks. They unlocked the door, said, "Everybody out," and pushed the minister in. He was slammed against a wall. The policeman behind King crooked his elbow around the pastor's throat; the one in front kicked him and tried to kneel King in the groin. After roughing him up for several minutes, they left to alter the charge to "resisting an officer." In all, Dr. King spent a total of ten minutes in jail. The errant policemen had returned, chastened, and said that the pastor was being released on his recognizance.

When King's case came up in court, the Reverend was found guilty of "resisting an officer" and fined \$10, plus \$4 in court costs. King refused to pay and was ready to serve the 14 days, but the fine was paid for him. The police commissioner said that he would not permit King to use the city jail for a "publicity stunt."

Martin Luther King was more an innocent than a sophisticated. Perhaps his most serious mistake was in thinking that black people, because they were black, were unified. His inability to understand the Northern

blacks became obvious when he arrived in New York for a book autographing party at a department store in Harlem. On the night before the party, he drove through Harlem nodding and waving from the plush back seat of a limousine. Blacks pelted his car with eggs.

The following morning, Sept. 20, 1958, King emerged from his car still smiling and waving. Black nationalists heckled him and booed. Shocked and puzzled, he went into the autographing party. Inside, he sat alone at a desk, smiling at a line of women—mostly black—who held copies of his book. One woman walked to the desk and said softly, "Are you Dr. King?"

He looked up from a book and grinned. "Yes, I am."

The expression on the woman's face changed swiftly. "You son of a bitch!" she screamed, and took a long Japanese letter opener from her purse. "Luther King," she shouted, "I've been after you for years." The blade tore into his ribs until only the handle was sticking from his chest.

Martin Luther King sat quietly, knowing what danger there was in moving. His attacker ran for the front door but was stopped by employees. Another woman, shrieking hysterically, tried to pull the letter opener from Dr. King's chest. He turned pleading eyes on her, motioning her not to do it.

At Harlem Hospital, Dr. Emil A. Naclerio, and two other surgeons were, in all likelihood, more frightened than Dr. King. They realized that since the point of the dagger had missed the heart, if he sneezed, it would mean sudden death. An operating room was prepared. The operation required three hours of delicate work. He would live. The would-be assassin was Mrs. Izola Curry. She was forty-two years of age and lived in New York. A police captain asked her why she attacked Dr. King.

"People are torturing me," she said.

"But why King?" the captain said.

"Him? He's trying to convert me from being Roman Catholic." She was taken downtown for a hearing and possible commitment to an institution.

After his recovery, King reminded his wife that they had received an invitation to visit India a year earlier. Perhaps this would be a good time. The preacher, who had studied more about Mohandas Gandhi than mil-

lions of Hindus, thought he might learn even more by walking in the Indian lawyer's bare footsteps. When the plane landed in New Delhi in February 1959, the press duly noted Dr. King's observation: "To other coun-

tries I may go as a tourist; to India I come as a pilgrim."

Prime Minister Nehru found time for an informal dinner with the Kings. The young man from Georgia was flattered to find that a chief of state was so well acquainted with his struggles for racial equality.

As he was about to leave India, King thrust aside the narrow shielding cloak of the cleric for the broad and vulnerable one of the politician. Now the question was asked: Is he a Communist? Martin Luther King was not. There were radicals among his followers—at least one of whom had been a party Communist. The pastor was as aware of them as they were of him. Ironically, as this group worked on plans to use King to further their ends, he told close friends that he would bend the radicals to do his work.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference meanwhile had set up headquarters in Atlanta. Dr. King all but commuted between Atlanta and Montgomery. After an agony of soul-searching, he decided that he could no longer divide his time between big things and small things. The SCLC promised a bigger role in life than the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

On Sunday, Nov. 29, he stood before the Dexter Avenue congregation and announced his resignation. "I would like to submit my resignation as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church."

Summer of 1960 arrived

early in Atlanta. The SCLC was involved in a mammoth drive to register black voters. It did not go well. This was a year of national elections. A strong and unified black vote would draw attention to civil rights. The blacks were apathetic.

Nor was Dr. King doing well with SNCC. The more militant students were passing the word from campus to campus that King and his non-violence betrayed the organization. A few said that he was a person who bubbled with enthusiasm and then went home to forget SNCC. Others said he had had "his day."

Adm Clayton Powell, King, and A. Philip Randolph staged a loud civil rights rally in Los Angeles in July, as the Democratic Party was convening in the same city. Dr. King invited all the leading candidates to address the blacks. They miscalculated. The leaders could not or would not risk taking a stand on civil rights.

The rally was far from a milestone in civil rights. The only people who spoke plainly and fervently for civil rights were blacks. The rally failed also as a publicity device. It swayed no votes in the big smoky convention. John F. Kennedy was nominated on the first ballot. He owed nothing to blacks and was prepared to give them nothing until it was politically advantageous.

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NEXT: Freedom rides



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Dr. King is removed on stretcher after being stabbed on Sept. 20, 1958.